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ABSTRACT

This publication explores misconceptions associated with distance learning and distance education. Because distance learning is being shaped by new technologies, it is sometimes considered a new form of education. In reality, distance learning has existed for well over 100 years. Although the Internet and the World Wide Web have increased awareness of distance learning, live video instruction remains the most popular and fastest growing distance education delivery mode. Despite concerns that instruction via the Internet or Web may do little more than replicate traditional computer-based training systems based on behaviorist learning theories, the consensus is that the new technologies really do support the use of cognitive-based learning theories. Compared with learners in conventional classrooms, distance learners must be more focused, better time managers, and able to work both independently and as group members. One unresolved question is whether students really want to engage in distance learning. Although there is no doubt that new technologies have given new life to distance learning, many of the old questions and issues still remain. The challenge is to use any technology or medium in ways that enhance and support learning and that respond to learners' needs. (Contains 17 references) (MN)

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Distance Learning
Myths and Realities

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Myths and REALITIES

by Susan Imel 1998

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Distance Learning

Education in which teachers and learners are separated by time and distance has traditionally been referred to as *distance education*. As technologies have changed to become more learner centered and to provide learners more control over their learning, the term *distance learning* has been applied to the process. Once, typical distance learners were those individuals who were unable to participate in face-to-face educational experiences because of geographic isolation or scheduling conflicts. Now, however, due to changes in technologies, anyone is a potential distance learner (Kerka 1996). This *Myths and Realities* explores some of the misconceptions associated with distance learning and distance education.

Old Wine in New Bottles?

Because new technologies such as personal computers, the Internet, and the World Wide Web are shaping distance learning, it is sometimes considered to be a new form of education. In reality, distance learning has existed for well over 100 years. Correspondence courses in Europe were the earliest form of distance learning, and correspondence study remained the norm for distance learning until the middle of this century, when instructional radio and television became popular (Sherry 1996). The development of distance learning has been marked by the adoption of increasingly sophisticated communications technologies as they have become available (Schlosser and Anderson 1994); spurred by the Internet and videoconferencing technology, distance learning is taking off (Weinstein 1997). "The appeal is clear: teachers and students can share text, graphics, audio, video, and virtual reality experiences despite physical separation, and they can do it in real time" (ibid., p. 24).

As the Internet and the Web have become more available and individuals have grown accustomed to using them as communications media, their use as instructional tools has become more widespread. For example, since 1995, electronic courses taught through the Web have grown into the thousands; in 1996, participation in web-based higher education courses was estimated at 1 million students, projected to be 3 million by 2000 (Edelson 1998). For part-time adult students who are unable to attend conventional classes, "Internet courses have clearly emerged as the technology-of-choice" (ibid., p. 1).

The use of the Internet and the Web as instructional tools is not confined to higher education. Many companies are turning to the Web as a vehicle to deliver training. In 1996, only a small percentage of the funds devoted to training was spent on web-based training, but that amount is expected to increase more than 20 times by 2001 because "companies that have struggled with various training media for years may find that the Web offers a breakthrough" (Gantz 1997, p. 37).

Something Old, Something New?

Although the Internet and the Web have created awareness of distance learning as a form of education and are used increasingly as tools for distance learning, they are not the predominant distance learning technologies. That honor goes to live video instruction, which is the most popular and fastest growing distance education delivery mode in the United States (Ostendorf 1997). Furthermore, "the live delivery of instruction to groups, not to individuals, remains the norm whether learners gather face to face or are linked by electronic means" (ibid., p. 51). Other media that remain popular for distance learning are electronic mail, bulletin board systems, telephone-based audioconferencing, videoconferencing, and telephone (Sherry 1996).

Bates (1995) suggests that "new technologies are not necessarily better than the old ones . . . . [and] many of the lessons learned from the application of older technologies will still apply to any newer technology" (p. 14). All technologies, whether old or new, should be judged on how they can be used to promote and enhance learning. The issue in distance learning is not the technology but the goals for student learning, including how and where that learning should take place (ibid.)

New Wine in New Bottles?

Many of the misconceptions about distance learning revolve around its differences from and/or similarities to face-to-face instruction and its viability as an instructional tool. For example, can traditional instruction be transferred directly to distance learning settings? Is distance learning a new type of instruction? Is technology capable of delivering high-quality instruction that is based on sound pedagogical theory?

Does Distance Learning Differ from Face-to-Face Instruction?

In their review of the distance education literature, Schlosser and Anderson (1994) conclude that in the United States, the goal is "to offer to the distance student an experience as much like that of traditional, face-to-face instruction as possible." (p. 14), and that distance learning pedagogy should not differ from traditional teaching (ibid.). On the other hand, Bates (1995) suggests that, rather than using technology to replicate traditional methods, the goal should be to use it to improve instruction. Whether or not the goal is to have distance learning replicate traditional instruction, the methods are not the same. Kilian (1997) points out that, compared to face-to-face instruction, distance learning is more costly in terms of time, energy, and imagination, suggesting that the computer monitor is an "information desert" because it does not allow for the nonverbal communication that adds so much to conventional classrooms (p. 31). "Online learning is 'not the wave of the future.' The F2F [face-to-face] experience, whether live or asynchronous, will dominate the next [innovation] because it will provide more information, especially nonverbal, than text-based media can ever hope to" (ibid.).

The characteristics required of distance learners also differ from those required of learners in traditional classrooms. Compared to most face-to-face learning environments, distance learning requires students to be more focused and better time managers and to be able to work both independently and as group members (Hardy and Boaz 1997). In many instances, distance learners must also learn how to learn in a technological environment (Eastmond 1998).

Distance learning and traditional learning may differ, but the goal should be to achieve the same learning results with either. Using high-quality technology, providing training and practice in using the technology, helping learners prepare, and teaming up to combine synchronous and asynchronous instruction are all methods that can enhance distance learning (Black 1998; Schlosser and Anderson 1994).

Can Distance Learning Accommodate New Approaches?

Some have expressed concerns that instruction via the Internet and Web may do little more than replicate traditional computer-based training systems based on behaviorist learning theories (Farquhar et al. 1996; Imel 1997). In reality, however, one of the themes appearing in the literature on distance learning is the potential of current technologies to change the traditional teaching-learning transaction (Imel 1996). The consensus is that the new technologies really do support the use of cognitive-based theories of learning. These theories, which include situated cognition, cognitive apprenticeship, constructivism, and the social development of knowledge, view learning as taking place when individuals interact purposefully with the environment and construct knowledge through these interactions (Imel 1997). Web environments can be designed to be highly interactive; to require the completion of meaningful and authentic tasks; and to encourage reflection, collaboration, and multiple practice, all characteristics of constructivist learning theory (Farquhar et al. 1996).

If We Build It, Will They Come?

Another myth surrounding distance learning is related to learner preferences. Do students really want to engage in distance learning? No clearcut answer to this question emerges from the literature. Based on their review of the research, Schlosser and Anderson (1994) concluded that, even though learners appreciated the flexibility and convenience offered by distance learning, they preferred the traditional classroom. In their study comparing distance education to traditional instruction, Klesius, Homan, and Thompson (1997) found that the convenience of distance learning overcame lack of teacher accessibility and that the learners (who were primarily elementary teachers) "accept[ed] and in many cases prefer[red] convenience of access over having a face-to-face instructor" (p. 216).

Simonson (1997) suggests that providers of distance learning are currently faced with two conflicting pressures: students do not really want to learn at a distance, but they are increasingly demanding to be allowed to engage in distance learning. This dilemma is reflected in the comments of the following distance learner: "'[I liked] the flexibility of the course. This is essential to someone of my age, in my point in my life, in my career. Although I would likely have signed up for the traditional face-to-face version, at this point in my life I'd have had to withdraw and perhaps never to take it again.'" (Edelson 1998, p. 11). Because learners are motivated by more than just their personal preferences, they want to be able to supplement and or replace conventional learning experiences and will engage in distance learning opportunities (Simonson 1997).

Summing Up

With the advent of new technologies such as the personal computer, the Internet, and the World Wide Web, distance learning has entered a new era. Although there is no doubt that these technologies have given new life to distance learning, many of the old questions and issues still remain. The challenge is to use any technology or medium in ways that enhance and support learning and that respond to the needs of learners. When planning and implementing distance learning opportunities, the technology should be invisible and the emphasis should be on the learning.

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